

Burroughs, J. - English and American song birds.

(1882)

A-B [unroughs]
1882

HARVARD UNIVERSITY.



LIBRARY

OF THE

MUSEUM OF COMPARATIVE ZOÖLOGY

45,689

BEQUEST OF

WILLIAM McM. WOODWORTH.

April 14, 1917.

English and American B.

APR 14 1917

Long Birds

John Burroughs

45,689

APR 14 1917

John Burroughs 89 cent. Jan. 1882

LIBRARY

THIS COPY BELONGS TO THE

CAMBRIDGE MASS.

ENGLISH AND AMERICAN SONG-BIRDS.

THE charm of the songs of birds, like that of a nation's popular airs and hymns, is so little a question of intrinsic musical excellence and so largely a matter of association and suggestion, or of subjective coloring and reminiscence, that it is perhaps entirely natural for every people to think their own feathered songsters the best. What music would there not be to the homesick American, in Europe, in the simple and plaintive note of our bluebird, or the melody of our song-sparrow, or the honest carol of our robin; and what to the European traveler in this country, in the burst of the blackcap, or the red-breast, or the whistle of the merlin! The relative merit of bird-songs can hardly be settled dogmatically; I suspect there is very little of what we call music, or of what could be noted on the musical scale, in even the best of them; they are parts of nature, and their power is in the degree in which they speak to our experience.

When the Duke of Argyll, who is a lover of the birds and a good ornithologist, was in this country, he got the impression that our song-birds were inferior to the British, and he refers to others of his countrymen as of like opinion. No wonder he thought our robin inferior in power to the missal thrush, in variety to the mavis, and in melody to the blackbird. Robin did not and could not sing to his ears the song he sings to ours. Then it is very likely true that his Grace did not hear the robin in the most opportune moment and season, or when the contrast of his song with the general silence and desolation of nature is the most striking and impressive. The nightingale needs to be heard at night, the lark at dawn rising to meet the sun; and robin, if you would know the magic of his voice, should be heard in early spring, when, as the sun is setting, he carols steadily for ten or fifteen minutes, from the top of some near tree. There is perhaps no other sound in nature; patches of snow linger here and there; the trees are naked and the earth is cold and dead, and this contented, hopeful, re-assuring, and withal musical strain, poured out so freely and deliberately, fills the void with the very breath and presence of the spring. It is a simple strain, well suited to the early season; there are no intricacies in it, but its honest cheer and directness, with its slight plaintive tinge, like that of the sun

gilding the tree-tops, go straight to the heart. The compass and variety of the robin's powers are not to be despised either. A German who has great skill in the musical education of birds told me what I was surprised to hear, namely, that our robin surpasses the European blackbird in capabilities of voice.

The Duke does not mention by name all the birds he heard while in this country. He was evidently influenced in his opinion of them by the fact that our common sandpiper (*Totanus macularius*) appeared to be a silent bird, whereas its British cousin, the sandpiper of the lakes and streams of the Scottish Highlands, is very loquacious, and the "male bird has a continuous and most lively song." Either the Duke must have seen our bird in one of its silent and meditative moods, or else in the wilds of Canada, where his Grace speaks of having seen it, the sandpiper is a more taciturn bird than it is in the States. True, its call-notes are not incessant, and it is not properly a song-bird any more than the British species is, but it has a very pretty and pleasing note as it flits up and down our summer streams, or runs along on their gray, pebbly, and boulder-strewn shallows. I often hear its calling and piping at night during its spring migrations. Indeed, we have no silent bird that I am aware of, though our pretty cedar-bird has, perhaps, the least voice of all. A lady writes me that she has heard the humming-bird sing, and says she is not to be put down, even if I were to prove by the anatomy of the bird's vocal organs that a song was impossible to it.

Argyll says that though he was in the woods and fields of Canada and of the States in the richest moment of the spring, he heard little of that burst of song which in England comes from the blackcap, and the garden warbler, and the white-throat, and the reed warbler, and the common wren, and (locally) from the nightingale. There is no lack of a burst of song in this country (except in the remote forest solitudes) during the richest moment of the spring, say from the 1st to the 20th of May, and at times till near midsummer; moreover, more bird-voices join in it, as I shall point out, than in Britain; but it is probably more fitful and intermittent, more confined to certain hours of the day, and probably proceeds from throats less loud and vivacious than that with which our distinguished critic was familiar. The ear hears best and easiest what

it has heard before. Properly to apprehend and appreciate bird-songs, especially to disentangle them from the confused murmur of nature, requires more or less familiarity with them. If the Duke had passed a season with us in some *one* place in the country, in New York or New England, he would probably have modified his views about the silence of our birds.

One season, early in May, I discovered an English sky-lark in full song above a broad, low meadow in the midst of a landscape that possessed features attractive to a great variety of our birds. Every morning for many days I used to go and sit on the brow of a low hill that commanded the field, or else upon a gentle swell in the midst of the meadow itself, and listen to catch the song of the lark. The maze and tangle of bird-voices and bird-choruses through which my ear groped its way searching for the new song can be imagined when I say that within hearing there were from fifteen to twenty different kinds of songsters, all more or less in full tune. If their notes and calls could have been materialized and made as palpable to the eye as they were to the ear, I think they would have veiled the landscape and darkened the day. There were big songs and little songs, songs from the trees, the bushes, the ground, the air, warbles, trills, chants, musical calls and squeals, etc. Near by in the foreground were the cat-bird and the brown thrasher, the former in the bushes, the latter on the top of a hickory. These birds are related to the mocking-bird, and may be called performers; their songs are a series of vocal feats, like the exhibition of an acrobat; they throw musical somersaults and turn and twist and contort themselves in a very edifying manner, with now and then a ventriloquial touch. The cat-bird is the more shrill, supple, and feminine; the thrasher the louder, richer, and more audacious. The mate of the latter had a nest, which I found in a field under the spreading ground juniper. From several points along the course of a bushy little creek there came a song, or a melody of notes and calls, that also put me out—the tipsy, hodgepodge strain of the polyglot chat, a strong, olive-backed, yellow-breasted, black-billed bird, with a voice like that of a jay or a crow that had been to school to a robin or an oriole—a performer sure to arrest your ear and sure to elude your eye. There is no bird so afraid of being seen, or fonder of being heard.

The golden voice of the wood-thrush that came to me from the border of the woods on my right was no hinderance to the ear, it was so serene, liquid, and, as it were, transparent: the lark's song has nothing in common with

it. Neither were the songs of the many bobolinks in the meadow at all confusing—a brief tinkle of silver bells in the grass while I was listening for a sound like the sharp, continuous hum and rush of silver wheels upon pebbles and gravel. Certain notes of the red-shouldered starlings in the alders and swamp maples near by, the distant strong call of the great crested fly-catcher, the jingle of the kingbird, the shrill, metallic song of the savanna sparrow, and the piercing call of the meadow lark, all stood more or less in the way of the strain I was listening for, because every one had a touch of that burr or guttural hum of the lark's song. The ear had still other notes to contend with, as the strong, bright warble of the tanager, the richer and more melodious strain of the rose-breasted grosbeak, the distant brief and emphatic song of the chewink, the child-like contented warble of the red-eyed vireo, the animated strain of the goldfinch, the softly ringing notes of the bush-sparrow, the rapid, circling, vivacious strain of the purple finch, the gentle lullaby of the song-sparrow, the pleasing "wichery," "wichery" of the yellow-throat, the strong whistle of the oriole, the loud call of the high-hole, the squeak and chatter of swallows, etc. But when the lark did rise in full song, it was easy to hear him athwart all these various sounds, first, because of the sense of altitude his strain had,—its skyward character,—and then because of its loud, aspirated, penetrating, unceasing, jubilant quality. It cut its way to the ear like something exceeding swift, sharp, and copious. It overtook and outran every other sound; it had an under-tone like the humming of multitudinous wheels and spindles. Now and then some turn would start and set off a new combination of shriller or of graver notes, but all of the same precipitate, out-rushing, and down-pouring character; not, on the whole, a sweet or melodious song, but a strong and blithe one.

The Duke is abundantly justified in saying that we have no bird in this country, at least east of the Mississippi, that can fill the place of the sky-lark. Our high, wide, bright skies seem his proper field, too. His song is a pure ecstasy, untouched by any plaintiveness, or pride, or mere hilarity—a well-spring of morning joy and blitheness set high above the fields and downs. Its effect is well suggested in this stanza of Wordsworth:

"Up with me, up with me, into the clouds!
For thy song, lark, is strong;
Up with me, up with me, into the clouds!
Singing, singing,
With all the heavens about thee ringing,
Lift me, guide me, till I find
That spot which seems so to thy mind!"

But judging from Gilbert White's and Barrington's lists, I should say that our bird-choir was a larger one, and embraced more good songsters, than the British.

White names twenty-two species of birds that sing in England during the spring and summer, including the swallow in the list. A list of the spring and summer songsters, in New York and New England, without naming any that are, characteristically, wood birds, like the hermit thrush and veery, the two wagtails, the true warblers and the solitary vireo, or including any of the birds that have musical call-notes, and by some are denominated songsters, as the bluebird, the sandpiper, the swallow, the red-shouldered starling, the pewee, the high-hole, and others, would embrace more names, though, perhaps, no songsters equal to the lark and nightingale, to wit: the robin, the cat-bird, the oriole, the orchard starling, the song-sparrow, the wood-sparrow, the vesper sparrow, the social sparrow, the purple finch, the wood-thrush, the scarlet tanager, the indigo-bird, the goldfinch, the bobolink, the summer yellow-bird, the meadow lark, the house-wren, the brown thrasher, the chewink, the chat, the red-eyed vireo, the white-eyed vireo, the Maryland yellow-throat, and the rose-breasted grosbeak. Our bird-choir is far richer in sparrow voices than the British. There appear to be but two sparrows in that country that sing, the hedge-sparrow and reed-sparrow—both, according to Barrington, very inferior songsters; the latter without mellowness or plaintiveness, and with but little sprightliness, or compass, and the former evidently lower in the scale than either of our birds. What a ditty is that of our song-sparrow, rising from the garden-fence or the road-side so early in March, so prophetic and touching, with endless variations and pretty trilling effects; or the song of the vesper sparrow, full of the repose and the wild sweetness of the fields; or the strain of the little bush-sparrow, suddenly projected upon the silence of the fields, or of the evening twilight, and delighting the ear as a beautiful scroll delights the eye. The white-crowned, the white-throated, and the Canada sparrows sing transiently spring and fall, and I have heard the fox-sparrow in April when his song haunted my heart like some bright, sad, delicious memory of youth—the richest and most moving of all sparrow-songs. Our wren-music, too, is superior to anything of the kind in the Old World. Our house-wren is said to be a better songster than the British house-wren, while our winter wren, in sprightliness, mellowness, plaintiveness, and execution, is surpassed by but few songsters in the world. His summer haunts are our high, cool, northern woods,

where, for the most part, his music is lost on the primitive solitude.

The British fly-catcher, according to White, is a silent bird, while our species, as the phoebe-bird, the wood-pewee, the kingbird, the little green fly-catcher, and others, all have notes more or less lively and musical. The great crested fly-catcher has a harsh voice, but the pathetic and silvery note of the wood-pewee more than makes up for it. White says the golden-crowned wren (*Regulus cristatus*) is not a song-bird in Great Britain, but the corresponding species here (*R. satrapa*) has a rich, delicious, and prolonged warble. In the Northern States, its song is noticeable about the evergreens for a week or two in May, while the bird pauses to feed, on its way to Canada and beyond. In its breeding haunts the ruby-crowned kinglet, tiny as it is, fills the solitudes with music.

There are no vireos in Europe, nor birds that answer to them. With us, they contribute an important element to the music of our groves and woods. There are few birds I should miss more than the red-eyed vireo, with his cheerful musical soliloquy, all day and all summer, in the maples and locusts. It is he, or rather she, that builds the exquisite basket-nest on the ends of the low, leafy branches, suspending it between two twigs. The warbling vireo has a stronger, louder strain, often more continuous, but not quite so sweet. The solitary vireo is heard only in the deep woods, while the white-eyed is still more local or restricted in its range, being found only in wet, bushy places, whence its vehement, varied, and brilliant song is sure to catch the dullest ear.

The goldfinches of the two countries, though differing in plumage, are perhaps pretty evenly matched in song; while our purple finch, or linnet, I am persuaded, ranks far above the English linnet, or lintie, as the Scotch call it. In compass, in melody, in sprightliness, it is a remarkable songster. Indeed, take the finches as a family, they certainly furnish more good songsters in this country than in Great Britain. They furnish the staple of our bird-melody, including in the family the tanager and the grosbeaks, while in Europe the warblers lead. White names seven finches in his list, and Barrington includes eight, none of them very noted songsters, except the linnet. Our list would include the sparrows above named, and the indigo-bird, the goldfinch, the purple finch, the scarlet tanager, the rose-breasted grosbeak, the blue grosbeak, and the cardinal bird. Of these birds, all except the fox-sparrow and the blue grosbeak are familiar summer songsters throughout the Middle and Eastern States. The indigo-bird is a midsummer and an all-

summer songster of great brilliancy. So is the tanager. I judge there is no European thrush that, in the pure charm of melody and hymn-like serenity and spirituality, equals our wood and hermit thrushes, as there is no bird there that, in simple lingual excellence, approaches our bobolink.

The European cuckoo makes more music than ours, and their robin-redbreast is a better singer than the allied species, to wit, the blue-bird, with us. But it is mainly in the larks and warblers that the European birds are richer in songsters than are ours. We have an army of small wood-warblers,—no less than forty species,—but most of them have faint chattering or lisping songs that escape all but the most attentive ear, and these spend the summer far to the north. Our two wagtails are our most brilliant warblers, if we except the kinglets, which are northern birds in summer, and the Kentucky warbler, which is a southern bird; but they do not match the English blackcap, or white-throat, or garden warbler, to say nothing of the nightingale, though Audubon thought our large-billed water-thrush, or wagtail, equaled that famous bird. It is certainly a brilliant songster, but most provokingly brief; the ear is arrested by a sudden joyous burst of melody proceeding from the dim aisles along which some wild brook has its way, but just as you say "Listen!" it ceases. I hear and see the bird every season, along a rocky stream that flows through a deep chasm amid a wood of hemlock and pine. As I sit at the foot of some cascade, or on the brink of some little dark eddying pool above it, this bird darts by me up or down the stream, or alights near by upon a rock or stone at the edge of the water. Its speckled breast, its dark olive-colored back, its teetering, mincing gait, like that of a sandpiper, and its sharp *chit*, like the click of two pebbles under water, are characteristic features. Then its quick, ringing song, which you are sure presently to hear, suggests something so bright and silvery that it seems almost to light up, for a brief moment, the dim retreat. If this strain were only sustained and prolonged like the nightingale's, there would be good grounds for Audubon's comparison. Its cousin, the wood wagtail, or golden-crowned thrush of the older ornithologists, and golden-crowned accenter of the later,—a common bird in all our woods,—has a similar strain, which it delivers as it were surreptitiously, and in the most precipitate manner, while on the wing high above the tree-tops. It is a kind of wood-lark, practicing and rehearsing on the sly. When the modest songster is ready to come out and give all a chance to hear his full and completed strain, the European wood-lark

will need to look to his laurels. These two birds are our best warblers, and yet they are probably seldom heard, except by persons who know and admire them. If the two kinglets could also be included in our common New England summer residents, our warbler music would only pale before the song of Philomela herself. The English redstart evidently surpasses ours as a songster, and we have no bird to match the English wood-lark above referred to, which is said to be but little inferior to the sky-lark; but, on the other hand, besides the sparrows and vireos already mentioned, they have no songsters to match our oriole, our orchard starling, our cat-bird, our brown thrasher (only second to the mocking-bird), our che-wink, our snow-bird, our cow-bunting, our bobolink, and our yellow-breasted chat. As regards the swallows of the two countries, the advantage is rather on the side of the American. Our chimney-swallow, with his incessant, silvery, rattling chipper, evidently makes more music than the corresponding house-swallow of Europe; while our purple martin is not represented in the Old World avi-fauna at all. And yet it is probably true that a dweller in England hears more bird-music throughout the year than a dweller in this country, and that which, in some respects, is of a superior order.

In the first place, there is not so much of it lost "upon the desert air," upon the wild, unlistening solitudes. The English birds are more domestic and familiar than ours; more directly and intimately associated with man; not, as a class, so withdrawn and lost in the great void of the wild and the unreclaimed. England is like a continent concentrated—all the waste land, the barren stretches, the wildernesses left out. The birds are brought near together and near to man. Wood birds here are house and garden birds there. They find good pasturage and protection everywhere. A land of parks, and gardens, and hedge-rows, and game preserves, and a climate free from violent extremes—what a stage for the birds, and for enhancing the effect of their songs! How prolific they are, how abundant! If our songsters were hunted and trapped, by bird-fanciers and others, as the lark, and goldfinch, and mavis, etc., are in England, the race would soon become extinct. Then, as a rule, it is probably true that the British birds, as a class, have more voice than ours have, or certain qualities that make their songs more striking and conspicuous, such as greater vivacity and strength. They are less bright in plumage, but more animated in voice. They are not so recently out of the woods, and their strains have not that elusiveness and plaintiveness that ours have. They sing

with more confidence and copiousness, and as if they, too, had been touched by civilization.

Then they sing more hours in the day, and more days in the year. This is owing to the milder and more equable climate. I heard the sky-lark singing above the South Downs in October, apparently with full spring fervor and delight. The wren, the robin, and the wood-lark sing throughout the winter, and in midsummer there are perhaps three times as many vocal throats as here. The heat and blaze of our midsummer sun silence most of our birds.

There are but four songsters that I hear with any regularity after the meridian of summer is past, namely, the indigo-bird, the wood or bush sparrow, the scarlet tanager, and the red-eyed vireo, while White names eight or nine August songsters, though he speaks of the yellow-hammer only as persistent. His dictum, that birds sing as long as nidification goes on, is as true here as in England. Hence our wood-thrush will continue in song over into August if, as frequently happens, its June nest has been broken up by the crows or squirrels.

The British songsters are more vocal at night than ours. White says the grasshopper lark chirps all night in the height of summer. The sedge-bird also sings the greater part of the night. A stone thrown into the bushes where it is roosting, after it has become silent, will set it going again. Other British birds, besides the nightingale, sing more or less at night.

In this country the mocking-bird is the only regular night-singer we have. Other songsters break out occasionally in the middle of the night, but so briefly that it gives one the impression that they sing in their sleep. Thus I have heard the hair-bird, or chippie, the kingbird, the oven-bird, and the cuckoo, fitfully in the dead of the night, like a school-boy laughing in his dreams.

On the other hand, there are certain aspects in which our songsters appear to advantage. That they surpass the European species in sweetness, tenderness, and melody I have no doubt, and that our mocking-bird, in his native haunts in the South, surpasses any bird in the world in compass, variety, and execution is highly probable. That the total effect

of his strain may be less winning and persuasive than the nocturne of the nightingale, is the only question in my mind about the relative merits of the two songsters. Bring our birds together as they are brought together in England, all our shy wood-birds—like the hermit thrush, the veery, the winter wren, the wood wagtail, the water wagtail, the many warblers, the greenlet, the solitary vireo, etc.—become birds of the groves and orchards, and there would be a burst of song indeed.

I append parallel lists of the better-known American and English song-birds, marking in each with an asterisk those that are probably the better songsters; followed by a list of other American songsters, some of which are not represented in the British avifauna:

Old England.

* Wood-lark.
Song-thrush.
Wren.
Willow wren.
* Red-breast.
* Redstart.
Hedge sparrow.
Yellow-hammer.
* Sky-lark.
Swallow.
* Blackcap.
Titlark.
* Blackbird.
White-throat.
Goldfinch.
Green finch.
Reed-sparrow.
Linnet.
Chaffinch.
* Nightingale.
Missal thrush.
Great titmouse.
Bulfinch.

New England.

Meadow-lark.
* Wood-thrush.
* House-wren.
* Winter wren.
Bluebird.
Redstart.
* Song-sparrow.
* Fox-sparrow.
Bobolink.
Swallow.
Wood wagtail.
Titlark (spring and fall).
Robin.
* Maryland yellow-throat.
Goldfinch.
* Wood-sparrow.
* Vesper sparrow.
* Purple finch.
* Indigo-bird.
Water wagtail.
* Hermit thrush.
Savanna sparrow.
Chickadee.

New England song-birds not included in the above:

Red-eyed vireo.	Orchard oriole.
White-eyed vireo.	Cat-bird.
Brotherly love vireo.	Brown thrasher.
Solitary vireo.	Chewink.
Blue-headed vireo.	Rose-breasted grosbeak.
Scarlet tanager.	Purple martin.
Baltimore oriole.	Mocking-bird.

—besides a dozen or more species of the *sylicolidae*, or wood-warblers, some of which, like the black-throated green warbler, the speckled Canada warbler, the hooded warbler, and the mourning ground-warbler, and the yellow warbler, are fine songsters.

A MODERN INSTANCE.*

BY W. D. HOWELLS,

Author of "Venetian Life," "A Chance Acquaintance," "The Undiscovered Country," etc.

v.

THE house seemed too little for Marcia's happiness, and after dinner she did not let Bartley forget his last night's engagement. She sent him off to get his horse at the hotel, and ran up to her room to put on her wraps for the drive. Her mother cleared away the dinner things; she pushed the table to the side of the room, and then sat down in her feather-cushioned chair and waited her husband's pleasure to speak. He ordinarily rose from the Sunday dinner and went back to his office; to-day he had taken a chair before the stove. But he had mechanically put his hat on, and he wore it pushed off his forehead as he tilted his chair back on its hind legs, and braced himself against the hearth of the stove with his feet.

A man is master in his own house generally through the exercise of a certain degree of brutality, but Squire Gaylord maintained his predominance by an enlightened absenteeism. No man living always at home was ever so little under his own roof. While he was in more active business life, he had kept an office in the heart of the village, where he spent all his days, and a great part of every night; but after he had become rich enough to risk whatever loss of business the change might involve, he bought this large old square house on the border of the village, and thenceforth made his home in the little detached office.

If Mrs. Gaylord had dimly imagined that she should see something more of him, having him so near at hand, she really saw less: there was no weather, by day or night, in which he could not go to his office, now. He went no more than his wife into the village society; she might have been glad now and then of a little glimpse of the world, but she never said so, and her social life had ceased like her religious life. Their house was richly furnished according to the local taste of the time; the parlor had a Brussels carpet, and heavy chairs of mahogany and hair-cloth; Marcia had a piano there, and since she had come home from school they had made company, as Mrs. Gaylord called it, two or three times for her; but they had held aloof from the festivity, the Squire in his office, and Mrs.

Gaylord in the family-room where they now sat in unwonted companionship.

"Well, Mr. Gaylord," said his wife, "I don't know as you can say but what *Marcia's* suited well enough."

This was the first allusion they had made to the subject, but she let it take the argumentative form of her cogitations.

"M-yes," sighed the Squire, in long, nasal assent, "most too well, if anything." He rasped first one unshaven cheek and then the other, with his thin, quivering hand.

"He's smart enough," said Mrs. Gaylord, as before.

"M-yes, most too smart," replied her husband, a little more quickly than before. "He's smart enough, even if she wasn't, to see from the start that she was crazy to have him, and that isn't the best way to begin life for a married couple, if I'm a judge."

"It would killed her if she hadn't got him. I could see 'twas wearin' on her every day, more and more. She used to fairly jump, every knock she'd hear at the door; and I know sometimes, when she was afraid he wasn't coming, she used to go out, in hopes 't she sh'd meet him: I don't suppose she allowed to herself that she did it for that—*Marcia's* proud."

"M-yes," said the Squire, "she's proud. And when a proud girl makes a fool of herself about a fellow, it's a matter of life and death with her. She can't help herself. She lets go everything."

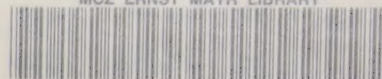
"I declare," Mrs. Gaylord went on, "it worked me up considerable to have her come in some those times, and see by her face 't she'd seen him with some the other girls. She used to *look* so! And then I'd hear her up in her room, cryin' and cryin'. I shouldn't cared so much, if *Marcia'd* been like any other girl, kind of flirty, like, about it. But she wa'n't. She was just bowed down before her idol."

A final assent came from the Squire as if wrung out of his heart, and he rose from his chair, and then sat down again. Marcia was his child, and he loved her with his whole soul.

"M-well!" he deeply sighed, "all that part's over, anyway," but he tingled in an anguish of sympathy with what she had suffered. "You see, Miranda, how she looked

Gaylord Bros.
Makers
Syracuse, N. Y.
PAT. JAN. 21, 1908

MCZ ERNST MAYR LIBRARY



3 2044 128 440 070

